P780187-0230
December 16, 1976
PA or FOI EXEMPTIONS
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Dear Mr. Hammerschmidt:

The Secretary has asked me to reply to your letter of November 30, in which you requested information about the costs incurred by the Government in returning to the United States the bodies of Americans who died at Jonestown, Guyana. As you know, the United States Government continues to be involved in this tragic episode and is investigating various aspects of the situation. Nevertheless, I wanted to give you an early response to the questions you have raised concerning this unprecedented matter.

On Sunday, November 19, it had become clear that the United States Government was facing a major crisis in Guyana. An American Congressman and other Americans in his party had been killed. A settlement believed to include over 1,000 Americans was involved, and its situation was uncertain. It was apparent that the Government of Guyana required assistance in handling a major emergency created by the presence of Americans within its borders.

The President, acting under his constitutional authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, ordered the departments of our government to take action to deal with this emergency. The operational decisions within the U.S. Government in this unique situation were made by the Secretary of State in conjunction with some of his Cabinet colleagues.

Under the President's Executive authorities, medical evacuation for injured Americans was immediately ordered, and the United States Government offered assistance to the Government of Guyana to prevent further loss of life. As events progressed, it became clear that there were large numbers of Americans dead. For a time, it was believed that there were survivors in the jungle; and the United States adjusted and increased its assistance to help the search by Guyana police and military. Finally, when the full scope of the tragedy of Jonestown was clear, our Government was requested by the Government of Guyana to remove the bodies. This operation was considered essential in handling the emergency situation which existed in Guyana at the time.

The Honorable
John Paul Hammerschmidt,
House of Representatives.

The federal government does not pay the expense of bringing back the remains of Americans who died abroad. That is a responsibility of their families or, if no next of kin can be found, the country where the death occurred is responsible for burial. It was evident, however, that it was beyond the ability of individual families or of the facilities available in Guyana to resolve the unprecendentad problems that characterized this situation. In fact it was not even clear who the next of kin were without identification being established. The families of those who died at Jonestown are, of course, expected to bear the responsibility for the disposition of the remains in the United States.

The Justice Department is fully exploring possible legal remedies which can be used to recover the cost the U.S. Government has incurred in removing and processing the bodies of Americans from Guyana. Now that the emergency is substantially over, the Office of Management and Budget and other agencies are reviewing the various operations to determine the exact cost to the United States Government. Although the costs to the United States Government of an effort of this magnitnde obviously are considerable, they are substantially less than the $8 million figure used in some press reports. Please be assured that we will report fully to appropriate congressional committees on these aspects of the operation upon completion of our review. Meanwhile, the Justice Department will make all efforts to recover the costs to the U.S. Government.

If you have any further questions, you may wish to contact Deputy Assistant Secretary John Bushnell. His telephone is 632-8562.

Sincerely,

DB/GW

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

ARA/PPC:JSchreiber:mbb #164-2093

Clearances: Inter-Agency
ARA:GLister
ARA:JBushnell
H:ENef
EN/GW

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

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November 30, 1978

FADRC
DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

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ACTION
is assigned to
ARA

The Honorable Cyrus R. Vance
Secretary of State
Department of State
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Several of my constituents have been in touch with me to express their indignation that our government is using tax monies to return to the United States the bodies of those cult members who committed suicide in Guyana.

There are a couple of main points which are included in all of these protests. One is that these people were in Guyana as a result of their own choosing. They had not been sent there by our government. Another point is the comparison of the treatment given in this case as compared to the assistance which would be offered by our government to a private citizen who died while traveling abroad. It is my understanding that no financial assistance would be given in the latter case.

I believe my constituents are entitled to know why their tax money has been spent in this manner. Therefore, I would appreciate receiving answers to the following questions:

What was the basis for expending tax monies in this instance?

Has there been a change in basic policy relative to providing financial assistance to return bodies of U.S. citizens who die abroad? If not, how can this be justified in view of the action taken with the dead in Guyana?

What specific funds were used for this purpose?

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JOHN PAUL HAMMERSCHMIDT

What individual approved use of tax monies for this purpose?

What steps are being taken, if any, to recover from the People's Temple some or all of the tax money which has been expended?

Your assistance in providing answers to the above is much appreciated.

With kind regards,

Sincerely,

John Paul Hammerschmidt

JOHN PAUL HAMMERSCHMIDT
Member of Congress

JPH:rjk